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Excerpt
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Part I

The Battle in Context

1 Introduction

Battles Galore

In January 1958, a woman from Crowborough in Sussex inquired hopefully as to whether there was a law against naked mannequins being displayed in drapers' windows.¹ She directed her question to the Public Morality Council (PMC) in London, Britain's leading moral vigilante organisation and longest-standing ecumenical body. The PMC was widely regarded as the religious authority on sexual morality in Britain, having been founded by the Church of England in 1899 to represent all the major Christian and Jewish churches on sexual issues. The 1950s was its heyday when it acted as the clearing house for forwarded complaints received by church leaders – including the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, the chief rabbi and the president of the Free Church Council. It wielded enormous influence in offices of state, local government, the police and the entertainment industry. Conservative Christianity in the post-war years was in its prime in Britain, with sex the litmus test of probity, authority, social order and religiosity. The vigilante was widely held in respect and alarm. The Crowborough complainant brings into sharp relief an expectation that the PMC could enforce a normative puritanical code, even upon a plaster composite representation of the human body largely devoid of anatomical detail.

This book is about the battle that erupted in the mid-twentieth century over the threat to Christian Britain that was feared would follow from three major menaces of the period: sex, Humanists and secularisation. For conservative Christians, the heart of all that was good about British culture was founded upon a religious reverence for decency and correctness in behaviour, rooted in a puritanical sexual code they averred was laid out in Scripture. This was interpreted practically by church

¹ LMA, A/PMC/63, PMC Correspondence and cuttings file 1952–59, letter from Miss [indecipherable] to PMC, 8 January 1958.

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authorities and a Christian judiciary, enforced by religious-based policing, with Christians assisting as moral vigilantes watching for sexual misdemeanour and reporting it to relevant state authorities. They also watched for profane heterodoxy that challenged the code, and strained to ban it from press, broadcasting and the stage. Conservative Christians pinpointed this supposed threat as being led by organised non-religionists – atheists, freethinkers, rationalists, secularists and above all, in this period, Humanists. British Humanists constituted a tiny but increasingly organised group who, in addition to seeking freedom from persecution for their atheist and agnostic views, developed between the 1930s and 1970s a specific ethical polity based on the individual's right to control over their own body. With many coming from legal, medical and philosophy backgrounds, British Humanists sought legislative change in sexual affairs – including decriminalisation of homosexuality and medical abortion, marriage law reform and liberalisation of divorce, sexual education in schools, freedom of access to and advertising of contraception and an end to literary censorship on all grounds including sex. They also sought decriminalisation for suicide and attempted suicide, legalisation of voluntary euthanasia and approval for medical interventions in fertility promotion (artificial insemination) and fertility prevention (sterilisation). Holding this ethical polity together was a need to set the human body free from external, state-endorsed theocratic control.² But for Christian conservatives of the 1950s and 1960s, this collection of policies constituted a new and ethically dangerous credo that would cut the human body adrift from Christian theology, state control and sexual restraint, with all sorts of ramifications for the social order.³

In this way, sex became complexly and intensely entwined in post-war conservative Christian thought. The Humanist credo was perceived by conservatives as especially dangerous if combined with secularisation and the decay of popular faith, with the Cold War further elevating atheism to the status of traitorous adjunct to ‘godless’ communism. Sex was ensnared in a maze of thinking about religious faith, social order and the civil state that we would just not recognise let alone understand today – even in the churches from which this frantic panic has by and large either evaporated or been voluntarily suppressed to save public face. For this reason, our understanding of the way in which sex acted in the middle of the last century as the fuel in moral frenzy has not been

² This extensive Humanist agenda was laid out by the leading lawyer Glanville Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law* (London, Faber and Faber, 1958).

³ For a conservative Christian’s (Roman Catholic) rebuttal of William’s agenda, see Norman St John-Stevas, *Life, Death and the Law* (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961).

appreciated fully. Often portrayed by historians of art and censorship as a simple struggle between heroic libertines and preposterous reactionaries,⁴ the threat of sexual revolution in the post-war decades was not a single engagement between two warring sides, but a whole series of differently patterned zones of ‘combat’. It was a multifaceted affair deriving from the complexity of the puritanism that the culturally dominant Christians of the day were bent on preserving, extending and perfecting. Hence, the significance of sex and puritanism needs to be viewed on a wide spectrum of activity.

The result was a battle with at least seven different front-line zones. First was the struggle of conservative religionists, mainly of the Christian churches, to impose upon the British people a high degree of ignorance about the human body and sex, through perfecting moral vigilantism over print, stage, film, broadcasts and education. Second was the struggle waged, sometimes reluctantly, by local authorities on behalf of the churches and the constituency of conservative lay Christians, to impose moral puritanism upon the people through the licensing system for public venues – ranging across public houses, restaurants, dance halls, theatres, cinemas, coffee shops and advertising (especially of contraceptives and theatre shows). Third came the struggle between religionists on one side and organised non-religionists on the other – Humanists, secularists, agnostics and atheists – concerning the long-standing theocratic stranglehold of moral and medical law, and the aim they developed of pitching a Humanist plan for moral reform. Fourth was the contest waged by the same Humanists over the recently constructed Christian monopoly on moral and ethical broadcasting (mainly at the BBC but emulated from 1955 at ITV) as they sought entry to the airwaves to disseminate a non-religious view of morality and the material cosmos. Fifth was a discreet tussle in the 1960s between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church (with fallout amongst the Reformed and Free Churches, miffed at being sidelined) over which of the two could pick up the moral *baton* dropped in the face of the secular challenge. Those five frontlines of the battle occupy most of this study.

It is important to take note, however, of two more front lines that feature only tangentially in what follows. The sixth zone followed the ending of overt criminal prosecution for religious unbelief in the 1920s,

⁴ For which see Nicholas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901–1968* (London, Methuen, 2001), esp. pp. 165–213. Some accounts only have censorship appearing with a walk-on part in the post-war liberationist culture narrative; see for example Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (London, Methuen, 1995), esp. pp. 139–40; Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960–75* (London, Methuen, 1986), esp. pp. 195–97.

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when there is suspicion that it was replaced by seemingly intermittent and mostly indirect surveillance imposed by the police and security service upon secularists, including those suspected of communist links, helping to bestow a legacy of social criminality upon non-believers in the Cold War era. The study of this theme after 1945 remains seemingly impossible, for two reasons: because British security files dealing with post 1945 atheists (even well-known ones who confessed to being interviewed by MI5, the Security Service) are unaccountably not listed, let alone opened for scrutiny; and because, unlike other nations, post-1958 security files were closed at the time of writing. And seventh, there was the contest *within* the churches between those with conservative and those with liberal views of sex and sexual culture – a shifting and sometimes imperceptible front line of long-term theological sniping that erupted into more organised doctrinal warfare in the 1960s and 1970s. This begat a version of ecclesiastical ‘culture wars’ over issues like gay sex and marriage, gender equality, abortion, contraception, medical intervention in fertility and infertility issues, censorship and voluntary euthanasia (or assisted suicide); this internecine culture war within many major churches has not yet relented in the twenty-first century. As with the role of the security service, the liberal-conservative struggle within organised Christianity awaits comprehensive scrutiny, but a recent edited collection by Alana Harris has demonstrated how this might be done (especially if transferred to Protestantism), most meaningfully by the skilled religious historian.⁵ Neither of these topics is given the space here that they deserve. This book, then, focusses on the way in which the Britain of the middle of the twentieth century was the site for the listed five zones of religious and cultural conflict. When considered in their cumulative impact, these zones witnessed amorphous fighting for the survival or dismantling of Christian Britain, with sometimes confused and overlapping running skirmishes that lasted, at their peak intensity, until the 1980s.

This was a period of dynamism in religious affairs. On the one hand, it is worth remembering just how much Christian renewal was in the air in the post-war years. Politicians across the continent, including in Britain, were heralding ‘Christian democracy’ as the moral, anti-materialist panacea for the wrongs of Europe in war and peace, and even socialists were morally conservative.⁶ Conservative Christians feared by turns the

⁵ Alana Harris (ed.), *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶ Sir Stafford Cripps, *Towards Christian Democracy* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1945).

atheist, the communist, the feminist, the liberal theologian, the wavering church leader, the medical reformer, the capitalist of the big cultural industries, the ‘advanced’ comic, the script writer, the artistic entrepreneur of the intellectual middle classes, the BBC producer, the sexually precocious and the ‘invert’, and the underworld pimp and sex slaver. At the outset in the 1940s and early 1950s, for all that the struggle was perceived as mammoth, there was confidence amongst conservative religionists that moral regulation was in good working order and being serviced by new legislation. International co-operation was developing to combat the spread of sexual ‘filth’, and governments and parliamentarians were receptive to the mushrooming number of petitions and delegations from churches and moral vigilante groups. Conservative Christians believed that there was universal recognition of where moral righteousness was located, and that there was no serious intellectual or theological opposition to sexual restraint as the undefiled backbone of British values. Moreover, with individuals adopting moral respectability with some vigour amidst the moral return to normalcy after the war, the mood of the nation seemed unopposedly for the promotion of that restraint. In the 1940s and 1950s there were votes in moral self-control, making the twenty years following the end of the Second World War one of invigoration and advancement of conservative morality.

On the other hand, the place of religion in intellectual, governmental and popular culture was being challenged and, from the 1960s, very successfully so. Liberal theologies came to contest the agenda of the conservative religionists; in the *Lady Chatterley* censorship trial of 1960, witnesses for the defence included church representatives, and an extensive recent historiography attributes the liberal Christian cause with fundamental shifts in the culture of the nation in the ‘long sixties’. But more challenging still was the evolution of the organised Humanist movement – which, amongst other things, equalled the Christian presence amongst Chatterley witnesses.⁷ Non-religionists got better organised in the 1950s and 1960s, including internationally, and, though small in number, set down the first direct challenges to their criminalisation and exclusion from the public sphere. Of even greater significance was the challenge mounted by non-religionists to the churches’ theological

⁷ For radical Christians at *Chatterley*, see the evidence of Robinson, Hopkinson and Milford. For Humanists, see the evidence of E. M. Forster, James Hemming and Noel Annan, all in C. H. Rolph (ed.), *The Trial of Lady Chatterley: Regina v. Penguin Books Limited* (London, Penguin, 1960). On the Christian side, see Mark Roodhouse, ‘Lady Chatterley and the Monk: Anglican Radicals and the Lady Chatterley Trial of 1960’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* vol. 59 (2008), pp. 475–99. Sadly, no equivalent analysis of the Humanist contribution yet exists.

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stranglehold of key legislation dealing with sex and the human body. By the 1970s, British public culture was witnessing the undoing of Christian moral hegemony and legislative monopoly. This book is about how this transition was constituted of a series of combative encounters.

This Book's Interventions

The book intervenes in a number of key issues surrounding scholarly understanding of the cultural nature of twentieth-century Britain and its change in the critical mid-century decades between 1945 and 1980. These issues are interlinked.

The first intervention is to promote an enlarged place for religion in the secular history of British culture of the century. Many historians of sexuality and culture have explored the conservative sexual context of the 1940s and 1950s and the ways by which it unravelled. The literature on this has long been infected with both a focus on the woes of the political classes and a London-centrism, notably by scholarship on the ‘swinging sixties’. Whilst Richard Davenport-Hines has marked 1963 as the changeover year in politics, class and deference due to the Profumo affair,⁸ the wider London focus has recently been taken to a new level, and brought earlier in the period, by Frank Mort and Judith Walkowitz’s major studies of the capital’s mid-twentieth-century sexual culture. The most convincing case has been Mort’s, where, in his study of London between 1953 and 1963, he has pinpointed in the capital an emerging series of cultural beacons strongly themed by homosexuality and prostitution – a revivified high society, dazzling crime narratives that obsessed the nation, government entanglements in sex culture, the commercialisation of Soho and scandals of various sorts. Mort places homosexuality as a major unifying theme across the decade, and London as the reinvigorated heart of the national consciousness of sexual permissiveness.⁹ With a very similar intellectual outcome, Judith Walkowitz has presented in her study of *Nights Out* in London an argument intensifying the supposed distinctive cultural cosmopolitanism of large cities and – like Mort – the key role of Soho in the life of twentieth-century Britain.¹⁰ But these narratives elevating Soho do not explain the sixties and national cultural change. Rather than seeds of transformative sexual and

⁸ Richard Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair: Sex, Class and Power in the Age of Profumo* (London, Harper Press, 2013).

⁹ Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Judith Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2012).

intellectual change being flung, centrifuge-like, from Soho to the nation, the present book contextualises London amidst the claims for attention accruing to the regions, pits a seaside resort directly against Soho for its significance in cultural sexualisation of the working classes, shows that even in a northern industrial city a sexual revolution was just as much underway as in metropolitan London and examines the structural reasons that delayed change in the public cultures of two Scottish case studies. The present book contests the Mort-Walkowitz narrative in much the same way that Beth Bailey challenged a cosmopolitan-centred narrative of the American sexual revolution, finding it strong in the Bible Belt city of Lawrence, Kansas – which she described as ‘the state that most consistently represents the antithesis of bicoastal sophistication ... the ultimate provincial place, the ultimate not-New York’.¹¹ The task here is to divert attention from a sexually *avant-garde* cosmopolitan sexual-literary elite to a series of erupting battles, some in London, but some rooted in the regions in which conservative Christianity found itself in confrontation with rising pan-class sexual liberalism, a youth culture ill-disposed to deference and the establishment and declining religious values. This study complicates the sexual geography of mid-twentieth-century Britain, and proposes multiple realms of battle where Christian Britain met the power of those striving to facilitate the autonomy of the individual.

To do this, the book deals in detail, in a way not done before, with the operation of moral vigilantism in post-war Britain, especially in London in which, despite the scale of the moral problem that the metropolis presented the churches, was a place in which vigilantism had its most vigorous presence. More than that, metropolitan moral vigilantism was a surprisingly successful force, as we shall see, restraining libertine culture, to an extent corralling it within Soho, and within that quarter keeping it constantly under the cosh of daily surveillance by paid and unpaid agents of conservative Christianity. But Soho cannot stand as a cipher for Britain as a whole, nor even as the most important source of liberalisation of culture. The regionally diverse story of moral culture is told through studies of the licensing regimes of five places – London, Blackpool, Sheffield, Glasgow and the Isle of Lewis – to reveal the regional specificities of the nation’s official moral culture, and the localities’ different governmental and ecclesiastical mechanisms, their varying moral panics and the very different timings and trajectories of change to moral culture. London joins Glasgow and the Western Isles – the ultimate not-London,

¹¹ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 4.

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in Beth Bailey's rhetoric, if you will – as well morally policed, rather usurping the image that scholars have attributed to the capital, whilst Blackpool and Sheffield display how much northern England contributed to the liberalisation that lay behind the sixties cultural revolution. The book does this by looking at licensing, moral panics, religious vigilantism and sexual cultures before and after the watershed of the mid-1960s, to demonstrate just how complicated is the story of the ways in which Britain's conservative religious culture lost vigour. In the process, we see how historians of censorship have been too narrow in painting what was going on as mainly a bunch of freedom-loving arts liberals challenging unspeakably condemnatory moral diehards of the churches. So, the aim here is to put religion much more firmly, and complexly, into the secular historian's narrative of how Britain became a more civilised nation of progressive moral culture in the mid-twentieth century.

The second intervention offered in this volume is in relation to religious historians' narrative of what happened in twentieth-century Britain. Religion – its history, character and salience in that place and period – is overwhelmingly in the hands of religious scholars and those embedded in church history, faith history and religious studies. Much of the scholarship that has emerged since 2000 has served up a sweeping revisionism comprising various elements. Principally, this rests upon a denial that Britain secularised in the 1960s and after – an approach that leads some religious historians to traduce 'secularisation', quite satisfactorily defined in 1966 by Bryan Wilson as the declining social significance of religion,¹² as a teleological and ideological concept of anti-religious people, rather than as a valid concept, empirically measurable, of historical change. Instead, they portray religious changes as processes internal to religion – a re-arrangement of faith within Christianity and liberalisation of the Christian self, driven by baby boomers becoming spiritual 'seekers', and believing (in God) but not belonging (to churches).¹³ Not all of this literature pulls in the same direction, producing its own contradictions. But a collective consequence has been the

¹² Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Perspective* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966), p. 14.

¹³ Amongst the significant corpus of revisionist Christian literature, see Grace Davie, *Religion on Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994); Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte and Sarah Williams (eds.), *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London, SCM Press, 2006); Nigel Yates, *Love Now, Pay Later? Sex and Religion in the Fifties and Sixties* (London, SPCK, 2010); Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain 1963–1967', *The Historical Journal* vol. 60 (2017), pp. 519–46.

narrowing of religious history's engagement with wider social and cultural history of the post-war period, the increasing denial of change to religion being impacted by forces external to it (by society) and the paucity of non-ecclesiastical sources deployed as evidence on these themes. One of the core topics of this revisionism has been promulgated by an argument that liberal Christian theology broke out from the cloisters and university colleges in the 1950s and 1960s to trigger the religious crisis of the period as an internal, though in this narrative curiously non-rancorous, victory for liberal progressive Christianity in many areas.¹⁴ With very few exceptions,¹⁵ the revisionist literature emanating from religious history is one-sided by concentrating on the progressive tendencies of supposedly 'radical' Christians, especially in the Church of England. Such a focus resonates with many religious historians' inclinations, but deflects attention from the obvious: that whilst many Christian Churches were at least partly liberalised, neither the Church of England nor Britain as a whole ever came to be dominated by a liberal or radical religious culture. That delusion – that what we have now is a liberal and civilised Christian nation – needs to be confronted, and one way to do that (there are several) is through historical analysis. This book does it with an alternative narrative tracing the impact of conservative religion upon civil institutions charged with managing the nation's public culture. We focus here upon conservative Christians sitting astride the dominant public religious culture of the nation in a variety of organisations in the 1940s and 1950s, then being challenged in the 1960s and 1970s and in effect overthrown from hegemony (both in the country and in the churches). And rather than peaceable, this was a significantly rancorous transition.

The third intervention is to re-balance the same religious-history narrative from its preoccupation with the relatively *mild* progressivism of liberal Christians in mid-century with the more radical, and – in most realms – ultimately victorious progressivism of Humanists.¹⁶ Some liberal Christians raised their voices for some forms of legal reform, though rarely without sustaining the 'sinfulness' of things like gay sex, suicide

¹⁴ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007); Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England, 1857–1957* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); Sam Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism in the Church of England and the Invention of the British Sixties, 1957–1970* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018). See my riposte to McLeod in Callum Brown 'What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?' *Journal of Religious History* vol. 34 (2010), pp. 468–79.

¹⁵ One being Harris (ed.), *Schism*.

¹⁶ The one major area of failure of Humanist campaigning in the 1960s was in relation to voluntary euthanasia.